



Answering the Call of the Inner Child

by Jacqueline Wright, Ed.D.

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The poet David Whyte says that one of the pleasures of writing poetry is to find out who is there, to catch up with yourself. As I begin writing this article, I ask myself, as I always do, who is present or what question is presenting itself to me. Today the immediate and loud answer comes from my inner child, who is telling me that she wants to go out and enjoy this spectacular autumn day. As soon as I acknowledge her presence, a longing and an array of vivid images immediately come to mind. I see myself raking up a pile of leaves, jumping in them, hiking mountain trails, sitting by mountain streams, riding my bicycle, feeling crisp air on my face and warm sunshine on my back.

For some people, the Child archetype shows its face most strongly in summertime, with thoughts of vacations, swimming, picnicking, boating and going barefoot. But for me the strongest pull comes in autumn, when the air cools, the trees show off their brilliant colors and the leaves start falling gently to the earth. Then “she” wants to move, to play, to explore.

One of the ways I’ve acknowledged her strong voice in the last few years is to ride my bicycle on some of the beautiful trails around Atlanta and the southeast. As I sail under a rounded canopy of trees and watch the light filtering through the leaves, or feel the restfulness of shady spots as I ride through them, I feel like a child again! The responsible adult, burdened by responsibilities, duties and concerns fades into the background as “she” takes over, filling me with a childlike joy and sense of wonder. The frivolous playtime that I’ve boxed up and put on the shelf until the appropriate weekend time has finally arrived and I take a step toward freedom.

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Too often such moments come rarely in our adult lives as we deal with the ever-expanding complexities of living in today’s world. The seriousness of our lives, the state of society with its seemingly unsolvable problems that seem to gather more and more power can easily shut down our capacity to play.

There are, of course, many ways to answer the call of the Child within and each person has to find the activities that release those energies. The task is to hear the inner voice and to say yes to it. But there is often a dance of archetypal energies that must be mediated because the Child’s voice is often paired or dominated by a Parent or Adult voice. Such archetypal dramas play out repeatedly, whether we’re conscious of them or not. Becoming aware of this inner archetypal dance can reveal what animates us and what drains us or holds us back, leading to the possibility of a choice.

Jung certainly knew how to play. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he writes about the pivotal moment after his break with Freud when he realized that he had lost touch with the creative spirit in himself. Then he remembered a time when he was a 10-11 year old boy who played passionately with building blocks, creating houses, castles and whole villages. To his astonishment, this memory was accompanied by a great deal of emotion. “Aha” he said, “there is still life in these things. The small boy is still around, and possesses a creative life which I lack.”⁽¹⁾ His task then became clear: he had to develop an ongoing relationship to this lively spirit within himself. So he began to play, exactly as he had when he was a boy. This process opened the door to a stream of other childhood memories and fantasies. Jung calls this moment when he became aware of the inner child in himself a turning point in his fate. Even as an elder, Jung could sit for hours at Bollingen where he built his retreat and play with a stick on the sandy shore of Lake Zurich, creating rivulets for the water to travel.

I often turn to D.W. Winnicott’s writings to understand what is going on in this process of playing and how it functions

to open up our inner world. Winnicott is a psychoanalyst who has written extensively about the role of play in a psychotherapeutic setting. He writes:

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.⁽²⁾

Winnicott goes on to say that playing is a natural, creative experience that takes place in a transitional space, a neutral area that belongs neither to inner psychic reality nor to the external world. It supports communication with oneself and redirects our attention from an external, objective goal to the spontaneous creation of thought latent in the mind itself. What is most important about it is the state of near withdrawal or concentration which occurs.

As an adult, answering the call of our inner child to play can help reconnect us with a sense of adventurousness and an aliveness of our senses. It can also bring up the history of the pleasure and pain we experienced as a child. Such memories can help us see more clearly how our lives in the present are a consequence of the experiences and patterns we adopted when we were younger. We can then use these insights to renew our present lives and enlarge the scope of our living.

In the process of adapting to family rules, values and systems our inner child often loses connection to those aspects of being that don't fit with the outer structures and expectations. Sometimes this means that the gifts and creativity that are brought into the world by our child selves are not valued and often get submerged or even lost. If the appropriate channels for expression of these gifts get blocked, then as adults we're often left feeling the strain of restriction from the outside and the pressure of growth from inside to find an outlet for this enlivening energy. In his essay on "The Psychology of the Child Archetype" Jung says that the image of the child "*represents the strongest, the most ineluctable urge in every being, namely the urge to realize itself.*"⁽³⁾ The vital energy of this archetype needs expression and cannot be ignored without consequences.

The archetype of the Child is related to the hope and promise for new beginnings and there are many inspiring stories of miraculous births of special or divine children who bring their enlivening energy and special gifts to the world. These special children, who bring renewal and expansion often come from unexpected places. Examples that come to mind are Jesus who is born in a stable, Venus who emerges from the water, Athena who is formed out of the head of Zeus and Dionysus who emerges from Zeus's thigh.

But these miraculous births are often accompanied by resistances from those already in power, creating danger for the child. Herod kills the young in order to destroy the Christ child. Hera, who is always jealous of Zeus' mating with other goddesses often tries to destroy the children of such unions. The old order resists giving way to any change or new energy. Jung tells us that when he returned to his child's life of games he gave in only after endless resistances, acknowledging that it was a painfully humiliating experience for him to play the childish games.⁽⁴⁾

Just think of how many times we try to ignore or kill the promptings of our own inner child! We find excuses, we feel embarrassed, we try to placate, tranquilize, ignore or deny it our

attention, saying we're too busy or our schedule won't allow it. Each time that happens, we run the risk of killing off that new life that may be urging us to change or to be more.

The call from our inner child often comes to remind us that our adult self has become too one-sided, too restrictive or too willfully progressive and is in danger of being severed from the roots of our being. By lifting us up out of old restricting structures and collective definitions of who we're supposed to be, it restores a playfulness and an expectancy of the wonder of tomorrow, regardless of our age. This helps to balance the seriousness of our adult lives and can awaken a new relationship with life. In this way, it represents the urge toward self-realization and anticipates the synthesis of opposites and the attainment of wholeness.

The energy of the inner child can bring about dramatic changes in a person's image or lifestyle, for example through the pursuit of new ideas, interests or creative works. Entering into new endeavors or returning to old ones offers a return to the totality and wholeness that was foretold or hinted at in the beginning of our lives. I am reminded here of a quote from T.S. Eliot :

What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

One of the most amazing things about moving toward the end of one's life is that one feels a collision of energies and of life stages. There is often a pull to return to the beginning, to where we started, circling back to something that has been left behind and may still have life. When I get on my bicycle, I open a door to the kind of excitement and energy that my 6-10 year old self had. I'm reminded of those first loves and desires and moved beyond the person I've tried to shape and mold over the years. I also open the door to a collision between my aging self, who is aware of an increasingly fragile body and limited physical strength and the young girl who thrives on pushing the limits. The conversation that takes place between these two selves is important and helps me negotiate this life transition and mourn my losses.

But we can't let our sadness about the losses substitute for a newer, interior self that may be wanting to emerge. There are many different people that inhabit our psyches and it's important to stay in conversation with that "other" in ourselves, however it may present itself. Holding to who we know ourselves to be in the moment may limit or restrict a new awakening of energy and creativity.

Our inner child is always prompting us to be more and responding to the call of this inner voice opens us up for change. As a manifestation of the Self, it is always calling for a restructuring and reevaluation of the self we know ourselves to be. Our inner child promises hope and new beginnings and signifies the potentiality of future personality development. How can we possibly say no when that voice calls us?

¹ Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 173-4.

² Winnicott, D.W., *Playing and Reality*, 1971, p. 64.

³ Jung, C.G. CW 9.1

⁴ Jung, C.G. , *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 174.